

Name: Diane Guz

Title: Paraprofessional

Organization or Agency: AFSCME Local 3429

Topic: HB 6881 - An Act Concerning Various Revisions to The Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, ranking members and members of the education committee: Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 6881, concerning paraprofessional compensation, training and working conditions.

My name is Diane Berg Guz. I am a lifelong resident of New Haven. I work at Celentano Biotech, Health and Medical Magnet School in New Haven as a paraeducator. I have worked for the children of New Haven for 23 years. I am a member of AFSCME Local 3429, the New Haven paraprofessionals' union.

I'm here to address the problems that face paraeducators in our state. I'd like to give you an idea of what paraeducators do in a day. I help teach our children daily, which is why I stay. However, in the course of my workday, I have been bitten, head butted, spat at and have gotten bruises and scratches from working in a special needs classroom. I have cleaned feces, urine and vomit regularly — sometimes all in one day. In a special needs classroom, there are 10 to 16 children, who are all of different learning levels. It would be impossible for the teacher to teach in a big group setting. That's why paras do a lot of teaching in small groups. Yet I make a meager \$16 an hour. A dollar more than a fast food worker and I am teaching children. This must stop.

There is a shortage of paraeducators in Connecticut. I came to work as a paraeducator after deciding three years into my teaching degree that I wanted to work with children, not fill out endless paperwork. I believe that we have a deficit of paras due to wage and retirement benefits. I save money during the year not for vacations or emergency funds, but to pay my expenses during the summer months, as paras do not work or get paid during summer break. I will get a lump sum of \$17,000 when I retire. Just barely one year's pay. After taxes, even less. At 63 years old, I'm a lucky para — some paras in the state get no retirement benefits at all.

If it weren't for paraeducators, schools would have a hard time, as we are used as substitutes daily. We deserve to be paid a living wage. I'm ashamed to admit I get Section 8 to help pay my rent. Without this help, I would not be able to afford my apartment. New Haven needs the money to pay paraeducators a fair wage. We need funds to go towards attracting and retaining adequate staffing. When we're not getting paid what we should, it's the students that lose out ultimately.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important matter.

Diane Guz